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ABSTRACT

The family life cycle perspective posits that developmental challenges inherent in the life of a family are both an outgrowth of developmental success or failure in preceding generations and antecedents to emotional well-being or distress in future generations of the family. To substantiate this family developmental model, life cycle postulates were subjected to empirical examination. A sequential path of variables representing the linkages between four critical transition points in family life were evaluated. These variables, in the developmental order in which they unfold are: each parent's history of differentiation from the family of origin; quality of the marital relationship; formation of a functional family system, as manifested by the presence or absence of child-focused triangulation; and the adolescent's adjustment. Subjects were 62 intact families with one adolescent offspring. Adolescents completed the Offer Self-Image Questionnaire and the Structural Family Interaction Pattern Questionnaire. Parents completed the Spanier Dyadic Adjustment Scale and the Parental Relationship Inventory. Path analysis was used as the primary statistical technique. Variations of the path model were assessed using three separate indices of triangulation. The results indicated that the overall path model was confirmed at every link in the developmental chain. These findings lend support to the family life cycle perspective. (Author/NRB)

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EXPLORATION OF CRITICAL DEVELOPMENTAL PHASES IN FAMILY LIFE

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ABSTRACT

Exploration of Critical Developmental Phases in Family Life

By

Sandy Silver Stutman, Ph.D.

The purpose of this research was to confirm the notion that there is a developmental chain of events in the life of a family whereby resolution of the tasks at each phase determines the family's ability to master subsequent life cycle challenges. The investigation attempted to substantiate this family developmental model by subjecting these life cycle postulates to empirical examination. To this end, the author evaluated a sequential path of variables representing the linkages between four critical transition points in family life. These variables, cited in the developmental order in which they unfold are: each parent's history of differentiation from the family of origin; quality of the marital relationship; formation of a functional family system, as manifested by the presence or absence of child-focused triangulation; and the adolescent's adjustment.

The study was conducted utilizing a sample of 62, intact families (predominantly Caucasion and middle-class) with one adolescent offspring.

Path analysis was employed as the primary statistical technique. Variations of the path model were assessed using three separate indices of triangulation.

Results indicated that the overall path model was confirmed at every link in the developmental chain. These findings lend

empirical confirmation to the family life cycle perspective.

Exploration of Critical Developmental Phases in Family Life

By

Sandy Silver Stutman, Ph.D.

Family theorists and practitioners have long recognized that the struggles inherent in family life may be carried forth from one generation to another. In essence, this family life cycle perspective highlights the premise that developmental challenges inherent in the life of a given family are an outgrowth of developmental success or failure in preceeding generations as well as being an antecedent to emotional well-being or distress in future generations of the family.

The current investigation represented an attempt to substantiate this family developmental model by subjecting these life cycle postulates to direct empirical examination. Specifically, the goal of this research was to confirm the notion that there is a developmental chain of events in the life of a family whereby resolution of the tasks at each phase determines the family's ability to master subsequent life cycle challenges. To this end, the author examined a sequential path of variables which represented the linkages between four critical transition points in family life. These variables, cited in the developmental order in which they unfold are: 1) The effectiveness with which each marital partner has resolved the task of adult differentiation from the family of origin 2) The couple's ability to establish a satisfying marital relationship 3) The formation of a well-functioning or poorly functioning

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family system, as manifested by the degree to which the child is utilized as a deflecting force in the marriage (that is, the degree of child-focused triangulation observed in the family) 4) The adoescent's developmental progress and well-being.

In this vein, the researcher postulated that adult differentiation from the family of origin would have a direct impact upon couple marital adjustment, marital adjustment would be linked to the degree of child-focused triangulation, and finally, that such family triangulation processes would effect the adolescent's ultimate adjustment status. This series of linkages thus represents the developmental pathway created in this study to test the family life cycle model.

I will now overview the theoretical propositions which served as the foundation for the developmental pathway under investigation. I will draw upon the contributions of such theorists as Bowen, Carter and McGoldrick, Haley, Minuchin, Solomon, and Stierlin.

The basic tenet of the family life cycle approach is that families undergo a sequential process of development. There are emotional tasks to be fulfilled by the family system at each phase of its life cycle, requiring a change in status and roles for all family members. These developmental stages are conceptualized around critical events in the life of a family.

The first developmental task within the family life cycle is the young adult's differentiation from the family of origin. Effective mastery of the challenge of differentiation is the foundation upon which subsequent resolution of family life

transitions is predicated. Differentiation requires that the young adult be able to relinquish primary emotional involvement with the family of origin and create an autonomous life structure. This task also necessitates the capacity to shift allegiances from the original family in order to seek intimacy within a peer group from which a mate may be selected.

The second developmental task within the family life cycle is the establishment of an intimate and durable marital relationship. Successful navigation of this phase is predicated upon resolution of the crucial prior phase of adult differentiation. In turn, effective marital adjustment is imperative to the future formation of an adaptive family system and the ultimate well-being of the developing child. If the spouses are unable to negotiate essential tasks of marriage, they will be predisposed to utilize their child as a means of regulating the marital system.

In the subsequent phase of family formation, the primary goal is to negotiate an effective and well-functioning family unit. Such a relational system is based primarily upon the creation of a differentiated role structure where well-defined boundaries determine a separation of parenting from marital functions. This boundary definition allows conflicts between the partners to be resolved within the spousal system, a containment which leaves the child more free to pursue his/her own developmental challenges.

Couples who have been unsuccessful in resolving the tasks of marriage may recruit their child into the dyadic system as a means of reducing tensions between them. This process, termed

child-focused triangulation, serves to maintain a precarious family balance, yet it also has a deleterious effect on the developing child. Thus, the presence or absence of the triangulation phenomenon is a clear behavioral indicator of whether families are able to negotiate an effective family structure. Child-focused triangulation is the consequence of the unsuccessful resolution of prior developmental tasks in the family life cycle. Utilization of this process thus predisposes the child to future adjustment difficulties.

The final transition point highlighted in this investigation is the period of adolescent development. The members of the family must be able to maintain their integrity as a unit while fostering the individual development of the child. Similarly, the adolescent must affect a balance between continued intimacy with the family while at the same time delineating a firm sense of self. The adolescent's struggle for autonomy represents the culmination of all of the other family transitions which have preceeded this phase. When the family has successfully navigated the prior developmental transitions, the system is able to cope with the offspring's emancipation and is able to reorganize itself around this leavetaking process. However, if the family has not resolved prior developmental tasks, the adolescent's growth may threaten the stability of a system which relies upon the dependency of the child for its continuation. Specifically, when child-focused triangulation has been employed as a means of obscuring the larger marital and family difficulties, the adolescent's struggle for separateness is blocked from proceeding

smoothly.

Turning now to methodology, the research investigation was conducted utilizing a sample of 62, intact families with one adolescent offspring between the ages of 13 and 18, inclusive. The participating couples ranged in age from 34 to 59, and had been married for an average period of 20 years. The sample, generally represented a white, middle-class segment of the population.

Participating family members responded to a series of questionnaires which assessed the variables under investigation. The adolescent completed the Offer Self-Image Questionnaire, a measure of adolescent adjustment, as well as the Structural Family Interaction Pattern Questionniare which assessed the family triangulation process. Parents filled out the Spanier Dyadic Adjustment Scale, a measure of marital adjustment and the aforementioned triangulation instrument. Additionally, parents completed a measure of adult differentiation from the family of origin which was created by this researcher and Dr. Lich who is also on the panel today. This newly devised measure, the Parental Relationship Inventory, is a 50 item questionnaire consisting of descriptive and attitudinal statements regarding the subject's relations with the original family. This instrument has been shown to demonstrate effective levels of reliability and validity.

The primary data analytic technique employed in this study was a path analysis. A path model was selected as the most appropriate statistical method since a series of theoretically determined, sequential linkages was being examined. Variations

of the path model were assessed utilizing three separate indices of triangulation: the adolescent's separate triangulation score; the average couple triangulation score; and a family discrepancy score which represented the difference between the adolescent's perceptions of triangulation and the couple's view of family triangulation. Use of these divergent scoring strategies enabled the researcher to gain information regarding family members unique perceptions of the triangulation process as well as assessing potentially meaningful differences among members.

The results of the investigation generally confirmed that the overall sequential pathway which was created was substantiated at every link in the developmental chain. In order to best understand the results of this study it should be noted that the path analytic strategy does not utilize a conventional mode of significance testing. Rather, path analytic researchers often adopt the criterion of "meaningfulness", which has commonly been defined as a standard beta coefficient of .05 or greater.

With this in mind, the first step in the path analysis revealed a powerful link between differentiation from the family of origin and marital adjustment, yielding an impressive beta coefficient of .65. At the following step in the path another striking relationship was demonstrated between marital adjustment and the couple triangulation index, evidencing a beta coefficient of .60. At the final link of the path analysis meaningful relationships were confirmed between triangulation and adolescent adjustment. Interestingly, while the adolescent's triangulation score yielded a strong link with adolescent adjustment, the most

powerful relationship emerged between the family triangulation discrepancy index and adolescent adjustment status.

The results of this investigation represent a direct confirmation of the family life cycle perspective. The strikingly high magnitude of the relationships between each link in the developmental pathway lend empirical verification to the premise that resolution of each phase in family life determines a families ability to navigate subsequent transitional phases in its life cycle. Specifically, differentiation from the original family is a crucial foundation upon which effective marital relations are built. Next, the success with which couples negotiate the marital relationship determines their ability to create a functional family unit. Particularly, those couples who evidence a breakdown in their marital alliance are more likely to utilize child-focused triangulation as a means of deflecting marital conflict. Finally, when a child is recruited into the marital system through the use of triangulation processes, his/her own autonomous growth is impeded.

While the findings serve to emphasize that the most powerful link in the overall developmental pathway occurs between each phase and its immediately preceeding transition point, those stages which are more distant developmentally do appear to exert an influence on later phases as well. However, the bulk of their impact is incorporated and carried through the most immediately preceeding phase. For example, in examining the precursors to adolescent adjustment, child-focused triangulation is the most direct determinant of the child's adjustment status. While the prior phases of marriage and differentiation do exert some impact

on adolescent development, their impact is less direct and is channeled through the effects of the triangulation process. In essence, the researcher suggests that the more developmentally recent family phase acts as an "intervening variable" through which the influence of the more distant stages is channeled.

Finally, this investigation generated important conclusions regarding family member's perceptions of the triangulation process and their unique and differential impact upon the adolescent adjustment process. As anticipated, when the teenage offspring perceives and experiences triangulation occurring within the family system, he/she is unable to master effectively the adolescent phase of development. However, it appears that it is the discrepancy between parental pereceptions of this phenomenon and the child's view of this process which exacerbates the adolescent's emotional distress. The author maintains that it is parental disacknowledgement of the offspring's perceptions and experiences regarding family processes which serves to deplete the child's emotional resources so profoundly. When the adolescent has become the focus of triangulation within the family system, he/she has the painful task of absorbing the family's distress. If this child-focused triangulation process is compounded further by the parent's denial or disconfirmation of their child's experience, the offspring's basic sense of reality is threatened. Moreover, the adolescent may feel isolated from the family since there is no consensual validation of his/her perception of family life. Therefore, the isolation and lack of shared reality which are inherent in the discrepancy phenomenon

serves to exacerbate the child's emotional distress. This new finding which emerged from the study highlights the importance of congruence of family perceptions as a critical family process variable which may mediate the impact of triangulation during the phase of adolescence.

The results of this investigation lend empirical confirmation to a critical body of family theory. Such empirical corroboration of the family life cycle perspective will hopefully provide greater acceptance for family developmental theory as well as its wider application in clinical practice.

A thorough understanding of the developmental stages provides the clinician with a diagnostic framework to identify where the family might be in its life cycle and what may be the predominant family conflict. In assessing the origin of family distress the results of this study suggest that clinicians must identify which link in the developmental pathway is causing an interruption in the unfolding family life cycle. Based upon this diagnostic assessment, reparative work must be instituted which enables family members to confront previously unresolved developmental tasks. As this investigation has demonstrated, it is the remediation of these earlier impasses which enables the family to master the current transition as well as facilitating the smooth unfolding of succeeding phases in the family life cycle.

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